

Alberta Historical Society, March 1980

FORT MURRAY: THE GILSARDS BOOMTOWN SETTLES DOWN

by Tom Keenan



Tom Keenan

Fort McMurray

The Oilsands Boomtown Settles Down

Our community has some unique characteristics, but they're not nearly as extreme as people make them out to be," says Grant Howell, personnel officer for Syncrude in Fort McMurray. "There aren't fights in the streets every night and, really, we're a pretty normal town of 27,000 people." Normal is a word that's rarely applied to Fort McMurray. We hear about its phenomenal population growth, 25% a year for several years. We hear that it's at the end of a lonely 431 km drive north from Edmonton. We hear about people living in tents and beat-up trailers. We hear they're living in Canada's "boom town." Just don't use those words to a McMurrayite. "I hate the phrase boom town," roars local booster Ches Dicks. "I guess it went through a boom era but it wasn't a boom town. We didn't throw up overnight shacks and huts. There are some beautiful homes here, some beautiful businesses, and a lot of people that care."

A trip along McMurray's Franklin Avenue reveals plenty of beautiful businesses. There are two large shopping malls, and a Toronto company is eager to build a third. Residents can shop in the Bay or Safeway just like their city cousins. But it wasn't always that way. Newspaper editor Peter Duffy remembers five years back when "there was one grocery store, and the truck from Edmonton arrived once a week. Your wife had to know what day it was coming and have her grocery list all ready and you had to be down there and had to fight your way into the store, because if you were a day late the shelves were picked clean."

Fort McMurray owes its phenomenal growth to oil sands, specifically the Suncor (formerly CGOS) and Syncrude projects. During the main construction phase of Syncrude, thousands of workers were housed in a camp 30 miles outside McMurray.

"Everyone had problems when the construction workers were here," recalls Ches Dicks. "It was the era of the big dollar. I'm talking \$40,000-\$50,000 a year for young fellas, maybe

25 years old. The fast cars; a lot of people in and out of McMurray. The flights were horrendous; we had five or six flights a day and they were jammed solid." Other McMurrayites who survived those years tell of high stakes gambling, loose women, even murder. Newspaper editor Peter Duffy recalls chasing a story that someone had been killed and the body dumped in the Syncrude pit. "We'd hear the rumors, phone the police, say we knew for sure there were six bodies out there. The police would investigate, but the bodies never showed up. People like to gossip and these stories are so romantic."

Today the construction workers are gone, and Syncrude has a stable work force operat-

ing its plant. But the starry-eyed job applicants still pour in, many from eastern Canada. "To me it's incredible," says Grant Howell. "At our company alone, we get twelve to thirteen hundred people a month, just walking in the front door. And that's in Fort McMurray; you get more in Edmonton." Some find jobs, but many, especially the unskilled, leave in disappointment. Karen Saunderson works at the Canada Employment Centre in McMurray, and she sees the faces of the newcomers. "I'm afraid there are too many people coming here looking for our black-gold paved streets," she sighs. "The high school yearbook, for instance, is called Black Gold. It's known across the country that there is big money here, and everybody wants to get a piece of the action."

If you stand in the Canada Employment Centre in McMurray for a few minutes, you'll probably hear the rich tones of a Newfoundland accent. There are about 7,000 people from the Maritimes in Fort McMurray. They even have a club.

Gil Whyatt is president of the McMurray Newfoundland Club. He attributes the initial influx of Newfoundlanders to fortuitous timing. "There was quite a large refinery started in Newfoundland. When it closed down, Syncrude was just starting up and needed expertise in trouble-shooting their refinery. They took just about everybody who worked at that refinery in Newfoundland." Even though he's 4,000 miles from home, Whyatt can go to his local grocery store and buy such Newfie delicacies as salt fish, biscuits, and salt pork. If the demand is great enough they might even get the store to import seal flippers. But Fort McMurray is not Newfoundland, and many people miss the sea and their families back home. As Gil Whyatt puts it, "The call of the island is quite high for some people. They get talking about the good times and the things they miss back home and the next thing you know three or four of them are packed up and gone. Sometimes they say

"The construction workers are gone, and Syncrude has a stable workforce operating its plant. But the starry-eyed job applicants still pour in."



Howard Morris Photography

Above: mainstreet McMurray; top: Downtown McMurray: another boom coming?



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Ed.

Down with Snowmobiles!

In a recent article in your magazine you stated in an article about snowmobilers that: they were becoming more responsible; and the main problem was noise which is being reduced. In point of fact: snowmobilers have shown no sign at all of becoming responsible. They are, however, being banned in more and more places because of their activities. Noise was and still is only part of the problem. The main problem is that they turn all snow-covered areas into highways whether or not they are private lawns, back alleys or public parks. No child is safe outdoors in any town where snowmobiles are allowed any freedom at all. Your article was misleading and presented a picture far from reality.

G.W. Wyborn, Grande Prairie

Emily Murphy and Drugs

Your article on Emily Murphy's involvement with women (Sept/Oct '79) would lead us to believe that she was a civil libertarian. She was not. In a most unliberated way, she claimed that good mothers and wives were being led into lives of debauchery by black and oriental men through the enticement of drugs (*Maclean's Magazine*, Feb. 15, 1920). She claimed that marijuana use resulted in "death and insanity" (*The Black Candle*). As a result of the drug scare that she generated, marijuana was added to the Narcotics Control Act in 1923 "without any apparent scientific basis" (LeDain Report, p.230). Last year more than 30,000 Canadians received criminal records for marijuana-related



offences because of Mrs. Murphy's shrill pronouncements. I suspect that not an unusual number of them were found to be dead or insane.

A.D. Charbonneau, Calgary

Get the Family Whole Again

I want to commend your Year of the Child edition (Sept/Oct '79) with the thoughtful articles on divorce. As you state, we are so concerned about enhancing and preserving prosperity that we have forgotten the emotional needs of our children. You hit it on the head when you state that "the stress Albertans

place on economic success takes its toll on family life." To answer today's problems is to help the family gain strength again. We, through responsible leaders and media, must get the "whole" picture and encourage a whole, not fragmentary, healing of the family.

Maxine Nugent, Calgary

Vial of Life Program

I noticed the column on Health in the UpFront section (Nov/Dec '79) where the Capsule of Life was mentioned. I would like to make you aware of The Vial of Life program which is currently being instituted nation-wide and is endorsed by the Alberta Ambulance Operators' Association. Arlie Jespersion (426-7032) of Smith's Ambulance in Edmonton is spearheading the program in Alberta, and we have the vial available for any senior in Calgary at Kerby Centre. We are in the process of instituting the program in the Calgary area.

*Shirley McArthur, Nurse Coordinator,
Calgary*

Metric Muddle

I would like to commend you on your excellent magazine — it's getting better all the time. But I would like to suggest that you abandon the use of metric in the magazine and return to the Imperial system of measurements, so your readers could understand what you're talking about.

Lloyd Greenlee, Botha, Alta.

Omission

Congratulations to you for an interesting issue (Nov/Dec '79)... fine photography and well-written articles. I would like to point out an important omission from Michael Fay's article on Banff Progressions. There is no mention of the founder of the Banff Centre: Dr. Edward Annand Corbett, one of Alberta's outstanding citizens. There is a plaque in his memory in Corbett Hall at the Banff Centre.

Nora J. McPhail, Edmonton

The Vanishing Wolf

I was pleased to see such an informative and pictorially impressive article on wolves (Nov/Dec '79). The author presented a clear and realistic portrait of the wolf. Environment Minister Steve



Rogers has announced that 200 wolves will be trapped, shot or poisoned this year. While I can sympathize with the ranchers, it's hard to accept the annihilation of 200 wolves, or of any species of wildlife, regardless of their gastronomic persuasion. The pictures that accompanied the article were much appreciated, and something I will keep to show my children, as it's quite likely that the photographs will outlive the wolf species.

Mrs. Shelly Dennis, Black Diamond

Good to Hear...

I received your magazine by a post office error. I didn't send it on to its rightful owner until I had read it cover to cover. It is an excellent Canadian magazine. Please send my subscription beginning with your next issue.

Mrs. Joy Nash, Pine Point, NWT

A note of commendation on the quality of the Alberta Motorist in the past year. It is now a magazine I look forward to and read from cover to cover, each issue. Keep up the good work.

Mrs. Alice MacDonald, Edmonton

Letters to the Editor should be sent to the Alberta Motorist, #202, 10734-107 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5H 0W8. While we welcome all correspondence and will attempt to publish as many letters as possible, please remember that space is limited and we cannot guarantee to publish everything we receive. We also reserve the right to edit letters according to the dictates of space.



Athabasca riverboats in dry dock for the winter. Boats are still used to bring goods into McMurray but now the highway has taken over most of their traffic.

goodbye, sometimes they don't, they're in too much of a hurry."

The average age of residents of Fort McMurray is about 22 years. This produces an unusual demand for youth-oriented services. So many new babies are appearing that there's a rumour that pregnancy is contagious! "Advanced Raquetballitis" is also rampant in Fort McMurray, according to Town Manager David Jones. Facilities to treat it are being constructed all over town.

With such a large youth population, Fort McMurray's few senior citizens are treated with particular respect. Walter Hill is a very senior citizen, having arrived in McMurray in 1922. He remembers travelling north with a dog team to operate the first drugstore in the Northwest Territories. He still runs a pharmacy, and can fill your ear with tales of early tar sands explorations. There have been several attempts to extract oil from the sand over the years, most notably the Bitumont project. Some were technically successful, but the economics of oil pricing kept them from operating at a profit.

Billy Bird has been around Fort McMurray for a while too. He became a "river rat" in 1921. McMurray's strategic location at the confluence of the Athabasca and Clearwater rivers makes it a logical base for river trans-

**"Stand in Canada
Manpower in Ft. McMurray
for a few minutes,
you'll hear the rich tones
of a Newfoundland accent.
They even have their
own club."**

port, and Bird earned his master's papers on the sternwheel steamboats that used to ply the Athabasca and MacKenzie rivers right to the Arctic Circle. The sternwheelers pushed barges loaded with food and hard goods for the North. "Anybody that tells you they've worked the Athabasca River and never was on a sandbar is a liar," laughs Billy Bird. "I know, I spent all my life on it. It's a river that you've got to read."

The sternwheelers are gone, but boats still work the river. And new forms of transportation have come to town: Fort McMurray has a snowmobile problem.

"It's a hot issue in this town," laments David Jones. "A lot of people came to Fort McMurray to get away from the very heavy restrictions of city life." There are snowmobile trails right in the town, but many people use their

machines wherever they please, and the town has had to purchase its own snowmobile to chase offenders.

Fort McMurray also has more than its share of practical jokes. Since there's plenty of money around town, some of their pranks have been colossal. One resident returned from vacation to find a large I-Beam cemented into his newly-paved driveway. "His driveway had been sodded," recalls Peter Duffy, "and little flowers had been planted. Flying from the top of the I-Beam was the Union Jack." The gentleman who owned the driveway was Irish, but he enjoyed the joke anyway. Other jokes have involved betting, where the loser has to pay with a bottle of whiskey. The winner doesn't always enjoy his prize. In one case, a bottle of fine spiritis arrived embedded in a block of freshly-set concrete. Only the label was exposed, peeking out to tantalize the recipient. There are plenty of other pranks on Fort McMurray's history books, but according to Duffy, "You can't repeat some of them in print, or anywhere, but nobody was hurt. Everybody had a good time."

Some practical jokes may border on crime, but real crime is no laughing matter in Fort McMurray. It seems to be getting worse. Walter Hill has seen the town grow from a few hundred people to 27,000. He feels increased

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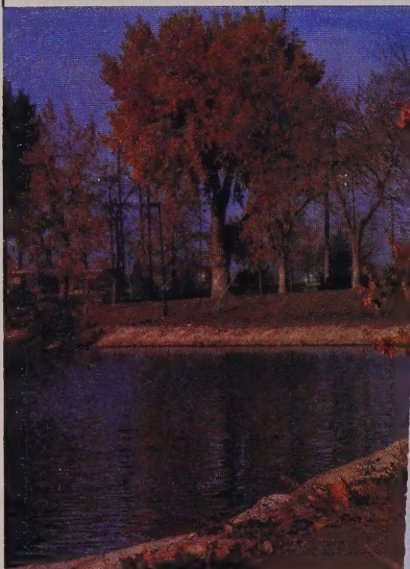
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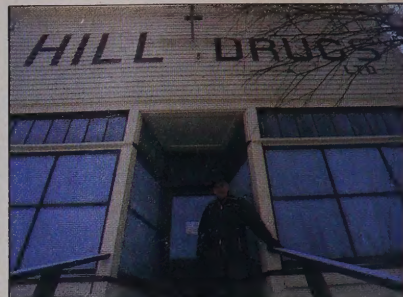
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TOWNSCAPE

crime is to be expected. "Once you become civilized, you become uncivilized." According to a press release from the Fort McMurray detachment of the RCMP, in the first six months of 1979 drug abuse prosecutions rose 81% and liquor offenses 37% over the same period in 1978. Sexual assaults were up 10% and impaired driving offenses rose 49%. Yet RCMP Inspector J.R. Gilhome feels these numbers are due largely to stricter enforcement. "I don't think that there is anything startling about the crime rates compared to other places. We've got a more isolated type of community than you have further south. There's a generally higher solved rate on crimes because people don't have a multitude of high-ways to travel on."

Stepped-up law enforcement is part of what



Walter Hill outside his drugstore.

McMurrayites like to see as their transition to a nice family town. "The roughnecks and the rowdies have been in," says Peter Duffy, "they have dug the ditches, they've put up the steel, they've bolted the bolts and welded the welds, and they've gone. Now the families have moved in and now the churches are springing up, and the stores and the schools. This is going to have a subduing effect. You could throw 1,000 policemen in here and they've won't have the same effect as 100 families who really care about what their children are getting into and what women are going to be exposed to. The families are going to control the town."

But wait a minute! Just as Fort McMurray settles down to be a sedate, almost boring town, the "third oil sands plant" has been approved. Even though its employees will live in a new town 100 km north, there will be a major impact on Fort McMurray. According to MLA Norm Weiss, "Fort McMurray will always remain the regional centre here because of facilities such as the new \$41 million regional hospital, the new provincial building, the courthouse, and the detention centre." He estimates the new Alsands plant will add another 3,000 people to Fort McMurray, with 12,000-15,000 going to the new town of Fort Hills.

So the question is, will the gamblers, rowdies and toughs tear up this family town again? Ches Dicks is confident they won't: "People work hard and they're trying to clean the town up and it looks great! When the old bull comes in, and the construction man, they're going to be a little rattled when they see that we're not bush league anymore."

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